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Footix: the history behind a modern mascot

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In this, the early summer of 1998, the eyes of the world have again turned to France as, for the first time in sixty years, the final stages of soccer's World Cup are being held on French soil. France 98 is obviously a huge operation organizationally and administratively with thirty-two nations' football teams playing sixty-four matches in ten stadia in nine French cities in the space of little more than a month, but the tournament has also had a vast promotional side, too: in addition to a copyright-protected logo (a football rising like the sun over the world), a slogan (*C'est beau un monde qui joue*), and a series of advertising posters, the organizers of the tournament, the *Comité français d'organisation* (CFO),¹ have also commissioned the design and creation of an official mascot called Footix. How, then, was this key figure of the world's biggest sporting event to date created? What manifestations has he taken? Most importantly of all, what are the historical resonances and myths of French nationhood recycled by this undeniably modern mascot?

In form, Footix bears witness to the importance and influence of the *bande dessinée* in French culture as he is a somewhat simplistic cartoon cockerel drawn entirely in primary colours with exaggerated anthropomorphic features (see Fig. 1). He has an enlarged yellow beak and wears a permanent smile. His crest is red and he wears an all blue jump suit rounded off with stylized blue football boots (recognizable as such only by their studs). On his chest, the words 'France 98' are written in white. Finally, he has usually been depicted carrying a white football in his 'hand'. It has to be said that Footix's status as a cockerel - important though it is for the



Figure 1. Footix. Reproduced by kind permission of the CFO.

discussion which follows - might well not be immediately obvious to all observers given that he is a rather nonsensical combination of a humanoid body and a grossly distorted avian head. In terms of his appearances, though, Footix has been virtually ubiquitous. He adorns all manner of promotional items from scarves to tee shirts and from posters to key-rings; naturally, there are cuddly Footix toys available to buy in shops and the mascot even appears as a character on France 98's official Internet site.² Footix's first public appearance, though, came significantly on television on 18 May 1996 on TFI's *Les Années tubes* programme presented by Jean-Pierre Foucault. In a sequence entitled *Les Années buts*, Footix was introduced, first in picture form, then 'live' to a studio audience including ex-footballers from France's 1984 European Championship winning side, members of the present national team, and administrators such as Michel Platini, former national team captain and manager and now Co-president of the CFO, and

Claude Simonet, President of the French Football Association. By the end of the week, the as yet still unnamed mascot was attending his first football match at the home of the league champions elect, Auxerre, and appearing once more on television on TFI's main football programme *Télé-Foot*. From the outset, then, Footix was clearly designed to have a strong media presence, which is so vital, of course, to the successful projection of a commercial and promotional image, but how exactly was he created?

Footix was the end product of months of work by a design team led by a freelance graphic designer, Fabrice Pialot, working for Dragon Rouge which beat off five other agencies in the competition for the contract set up by the CFO.³ The rôle of the mascot would be to personify the World Cup and its values, stated to be 'universalité, partage, émotion'.⁴ For the CFO, the mascot also had to have a distinctive, strong but friendly personality which would charm young and old alike. The appeal to children in particular was important for Pialot who wanted to 'créer un personnage résolument tourné vers les enfants, simple au niveau du traité, et donc facile à redessiner pour un enfant'.⁵ The ludic qualities of the mascot, such as its playful expression, are clearly part of this appeal to children, as are the design's bright colours and its soft and generally rounded contours which help to efface the aggressiveness usually associated with the farmyard cockerel. Furthermore, the designers had to meet the other criteria set down by the CFO brief which were that 'la mascotte [devrait faire] appel à l'émotion, au rêve, à l'imagination [et] être reconnue dans le monde entier comme venant de France [et] être hardie, gaie, intrépide et sportive'.⁶ After the initial design stage, the mascot was then subjected to a series of evaluations and tests throughout France with a view to ensuring that it was appropriate for the event it was to represent. The opinion poll organization, BVA, were employed to survey a representative sample of the French population to ascertain their views about the newly created mascot. The choice of a cockerel as potential mascot was viewed positively by nearly 80% of those polled; 76% readily identified it with the World Cup and, most significantly for this discussion, 91% immediately

associated it with France in general. Finally, 83% of 12-15 year olds polled found this particular cockerel to be 'extrêmement sympathique'.⁷ In short, after the survey, the organizers were pleased enough with their designers' work to announce that the official mascot would indeed be 'un coq, véritable personnage animé qui réunit en une même expression la France, le football et la joie de vivre' and that 'cet animal donne l'impression de rayonner, d'être satisfait. Il donne l'apparence d'un personnage chaleureux, affectueux, et inspire confiance.'⁸

The choice of a cockerel as mascot in a French context is highly significant, of course, given the historical and cultural symbolic resonances of such a bird for the French nation. Indeed, Footix's creator, Pialot, was well aware of this when he designed what he called 'Un personnage sympathique et très représentatif de la France'.⁹ The cockerel was first a potent symbol for the Celts not only because of its proverbial sexual prowess but also because it is the bird which announces the arrival of dawn, that is the rebirth of the sun, itself a powerful object of worship in pagan cultures: in a sense, then, the cockerel was revered, not least of all in Roman Gaul, because of its link with the solar myth and notions of resurrection.¹⁰ The symbol was then appropriated by the early Christian church for which the cockerel became associated with the soldier-saint, Saint Michael and, in the Middle Ages, it started to appear on church steeples in France.¹¹ In medieval times, though, it was France's foreign enemies who first used the cockerel in word and image in a pejorative way to mock the French king or, by extension, France itself by stressing the negative aspects of the bird's character and behaviour.¹² It is only from the fourteenth century on that French writers, mainly apologists of the monarchy such as Christine de Pizan, use the cockerel's largely religious symbolism positively in propaganda tracts supporting successive French kings such as Charles V, Charles VII, Louis XI, Charles VIII, Louis XII, and Francis I. By the seventeenth century, the cockerel had become a recognized royal emblem and appeared, for instance, in the decorations of the Place Royale in Paris in 1612 on the occasion of the celebration of the engagement of Louis XIII to Anne of Austria.¹³

According to Jérôme Duhamel, the first artefact explicitly linking the cockerel with the French dates from 1665 and is a medal struck to commemorate the liberation of Le Quesnoy bearing the inscription: 'Le coq français met en fuite le lion espagnol.'¹⁴ From then on, the cockerel becomes a veritable national symbol of France or, in Duhamel's words, one of les signes éclatants de la francité'.¹⁵ Despite its earlier links with royalty, the cockerel was adopted by the Revolution in 1791 as part of its own iconography to symbolize the French people and appeared on seals, documents, *assignats*, coins, and flags.¹⁶ Under the July Monarchy (1830-1848), the cockerel's status as national symbol was reaffirmed and it started to make an appearance on the flagpoles of the National Guard.¹⁷ In 1848, the bird took its place on the official seal of the Second Republic (1848-1852) and from 1889, it again appears on certain French coins such as the gold 20 Franc piece.¹⁸ Finally, it is worthy of note that, in the twentieth century, the cockerel has been adopted as a symbol by several French sporting organizations such as the national rugby federation. In this context, Pastoureau has claimed that the cockerel, essentially an element of rural culture, is more readily associated in France with sports based in rural areas, such as rugby, than with urban sports such as football. He cites the practice of French rugby fans of releasing live cockerels at international rugby matches and the fact that in media discourse, France's rugby players are often referred to as *les coqs* whilst her footballers are called *les Bleus* or *les Tricolores*.¹⁹ However, certain facts do not support this hypothesis: first, the cockerel has also been adopted as the symbol of the French Football Association and appears as such on the shirts of the national team; second, it is possible to see French footballers described in the print media as *les coqs* as *Libération's* headline to a match report during the 1996 European Championship demonstrates: 'Les coqs premiers de leur poule';²⁰ finally, the existence of the 1998 World Cup mascot, Footix himself, is further significant evidence that it is perfectly possible, in late twentieth-century France, for the cockerel symbol to be easily associated with the essentially urban cultural phenomenon that is football.

The cockerel, then, is quite simply a vital element of symbolism in the French people's awareness of their own identity, history and nationhood. It is a symbol which they readily associate with their own country's past, religious and military, royalist and republican, legal and civil, political and sporting, and, given its Celtic connotations, with their own perceived ethnic ancestry. Not least of all, the French see in the cockerel symbol a reflexion of the qualities they believe themselves to possess: as Duhamel has already noted, 'Admiré pour sa combativité et son activité sexuelle, [le coq] est tout naturellement devenu le symbole du peuple français.'²¹ The automaticity of the identification of the French people with the symbolism of the cockerel has, indeed, not been overlooked by the CFO who affirm that the selection of the cockerel physique for their tournament mascot was quite simply 'un choix naturel'.²²

The final element needed in the creation of France 98's official mascot was to settle on a name for the character. Once again, the tournament organizers, the CFO, laid down specific criteria: the name had to be 'original, dynamique et distinctif; prononçable dans les principales langues du monde; dépourvu de connotations négatives dans ces mêmes langues' and, *commercialisation oblige*, 'être protégeable à titre de marque en Europe, aux Etats-Unis et au Japon'.²³ A variety of potential names were subjected to various linguistic tests, legal searches and consumer surveys in France, Great Britain, Germany and the United States of America. Out of this process came a list of ten candidates which was then, significantly in the commercial days of the late twentieth century, passed on to the various companies sponsoring the World Cup finals for their evaluation. These firms organized their own opinion polls amongst their staff to find out the most popular names. The top five nominated in this fashion were, in alphabetical order, Footix, Gallik, Houpi, Raffy and Zimbo. The focus of the selection process then switched to the population of France itself. Between 13 and 26 November 1996, residents of France could vote either by minitel or by telephone for their choice of name. Nearly 19,000 people participated in this referendum (although it has to be said that some, at least, must have been motivated by the random prizes on offer to a lucky few

participants, among which were tickets for France 98 group games). 47% of those who voted in this first past the (goal)post contest opted for the name Footix,²⁴ and the result was announced on TF1 on 27 November 1996 by children's television presenter Dorothée: the twin elements of televisual presence and appeal to children are clearly two constant themes underpinning this mascot's existence.

Just as with the initial choice of a cockerel for the physical form of the mascot, though, the selection of the name Footix is not entirely fortuitous in a French context. Philippe Villemus, the CFO's Marketing Director, was gratified that the name chosen fulfilled his own criteria which were: 'trouver un nom court, dynamique, facilement mémorisable, à connotations sportive et française'.²⁵ It is specifically the French resonance of the name which primarily interests us here. The suffix '-ix' initially conjures up images of the famous French cartoon character Asterix the Gaul and his sidekick, Obelix. Asterix first appeared in 1959 in issue number 1 of the weekly magazine *Pilote* and then went on to star in his own albums, published initially by Dargaud, and, from 1967, in full-length animated films, as well as having a theme park devoted to his adventures built at Plailly in 1989. Larousse indicates the significance of this character for the French people in that 'Les aventures de ce petit guerrier gaulois (...) mettent en scène les stéréotypes nationaux français',²⁶ while Jean Garcin, writing in *L'Événement du jeudi* goes even further:

Astérix, c'est une certaine idée de la France: indomptable, combative, hédoniste, écologiste, sarcastique, faraute et cocardière. On y résiste à l'ennemi avec une opiniâtreté exemplaire. On observe, dans le quotidien, les régies d'une morale élémentaire ou les vices sont châtiés et les bons sentiments élèvent à la hauteur d'un art.²⁷

Asterix, for many French people, is, then, the incarnation of their spirit, of their nation's perceived qualities and Footix, by the simple technique of suffixation, has a name which immediately

conjures up those qualities for a French audience. Interestingly, foreign observers have also noted this element in Footix's constitution: *The Irish Times* commented that Footix's name is 'an allusion to the popular cartoon character Asterix'²⁸ and British sports presenter Barry Davies, while commentating on the draw to allocate teams to groups for the final stages of the World Cup, remarked on Footix's timely but not unexpected appearance, that the mascot is 'a sort of combination of Asterix and Obelix',²⁹ proving that even if the symbolism of the mascot's cockerel form is opaque for (some) foreigners, then that of the myth of the Gallic hero figure is, on the contrary, quite transparent.

Furthermore, and by the same token, the name Footix also evokes that of Vercingetorix, that other Gallic hero, this time from history rather than fiction. Vercingetorix was a first century BCE Celtic chieftain in Gaul who led the resistance against the invading Roman armies of Julius Caesar. Suzanne Citron has demonstrated how the events surrounding Vercingetorix, absent from historians' accounts before Amédée Thierry's *Histoire des Gaulois* of 1828, were elevated to the status of legend by the historians of the French Third Republic (1870-1940) and recycled by the primary and secondary education system's history textbooks, most notably those authored by Ernest Lavisse in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁰ The legend of Vercingetorix has proved a useful vehicle for successive generations of official historians and politicians in that it may be presented as the story of the first national French hero, the leader figure who rallied the 'nation' against the invader and who, indeed, died in prison after fighting to defend *la patrie en danger*. Vercingetorix has, then, been presented in official French historiography as an archetype, the first in a line of such heroes which would also include *inter alia* Charles Martel,³¹ Joan of Arc, Napoleon and Charles de Gaulle. This notion of continuity is the second important element of French national identity perpetuated by the myth of Vercingetorix in particular and that of the Gauls in

general. Vercingetorix is a key figure in a supposedly 'natural' chronology of the French nation which is reckoned to begin with the Gauls who occupied an area of Europe which is closely contingent with that territory we now recognize as France. In this version of history, the Gauls are the ancestors of the French people, the progenitors of a 'French race' which may now trace its existence back thousands of years. Inculcating the concept of *nos ancêtres les Gaulois* was vital to the French Third Republic as it sought to build on the Revolutionary ideals of the nation which were based on cultural and linguistic unity and on the sovereignty of the people. Constructing the history of France on the basis of a people, the Gauls, and a subsequent ethnic lineage favours the generation and maintenance of a sense of collective national identity. In this way, the French have been taught to see their nation as having a mythic racial homogeneity and cultural coherence.³² Furthermore, as Maurice Agulhon and Philippe Oulmont note, the concepts of national identity being founded on a united people and a recognizable geo-political space are central to the radical, anti-clerical and Republican version of history as they directly counter the earlier traditionalist, Catholic and Royalist thesis that France's heritage is based on a succession of royal dynasties (the Merovingians, the Carolingians, and the Capetians): the identification of the nation with a royal line is a reactionary contradiction in terms as, in the Republican world view, the democratic nation is the expression of the will of the people and this version of history puts the emphasis on the people, not the royal line, and plays down the Catholic elements given that the Gauls were pagan.³³ Such a view of an almost predetermined, single, coherent national identity flourished in the Third Republic and is now firmly anchored in contemporary France, even though it denies the multiplicity of influences which have shaped the country and, therefore, its pluricultural nature, which is why Citron speaks of the 'Paradoxale popularité de Vercingétorix et d'Astérix qui nous masque que nous sommes un amalgame de peuples et de

cultures'.³⁴ It is doubtful that Footix could take his place with his predecessors to form a Gallic triumvirate given that his popularity will have been ephemeral, lasting no more than the two and a half years from his 'birth' to the World Cup final due to be held at the new Stade de France in Saint-Denis on 12 July 1998 but, with the evident Gallic resonances of his name, Footix the World Cup mascot will have served further to reinforce the potent myth of a single French national identity being rooted in the perceived Celtic origins of its people.

We have seen, then, that in Footix, the CFO, the organizers of the 1998 soccer World Cup finals, have created a simplistic but lively, appealing and highly marketable mascot intended to portray a positive image not only of the event it personifies but also of the host nation, France itself. Footix's promotional and commercial presence has been extensive: he has appeared not only at the events of France 98 themselves but also on television, on goods for sale (both directly related to the tournament as souvenirs and those of the sponsors), and even as a character on the official World Cup Internet site. In so many respects, from conception to manifestation, Footix is a resolutely modern mascot; and yet he is also linked inextricably with the past. In both his physical form and his name, Footix actively recycles myths of French nationhood and perpetuates notions of identity which the French as a nation consciously and unconsciously have of themselves: the imagery of the warm, virile and combative cockerel emblem is combined with the resonances of the brave hero figure upholding the virtues of French civilization which is itself rooted in a historical and ethnic continuity originating with the Gauls. It is little wonder, then, that the CFO can quite simply and rightly affirm: '[Footix] plaît aux Français qui aiment à se reconnaître en lui.'³⁵

Notes and references

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1. The CFO was established as a legal entity in November 1992 with a budget of over 2.4 thousand million French Francs. Co-presided by Michel Platini and Fernand Sastre, its brief has been to supervise the entire organization of the final stages of the World Cup from marketing to security and from ticketing arrangements to commercial sponsorship.
2. URL <http://www.france98.com/>
3. France 98, <http://www.france98.com/> Internet site (France 98, 1998).
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. CFO, *La Mascotte de FRANCE 98 est née*, press release, 17 May 1996.
8. *Ibid.*
9. France 98, *op.cit.*
10. M. Pastoureau, 'Le Coq gaulois', in P. Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Vol. III (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 509.
11. P. Vial, 'La Source de l'imaginaire national', *Enquête sur l'histoire*, no. 1 (1991), 52.
12. Pastoureau, *op.cit.*, 513-14.
13. *Ibid.*, 516.
14. J. Duhamel, *Grand inventaire du génie français en 365 objets* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990), 108.
15. *Ibid.*, 6.

16. Pastoureau, *op.cit.*, 520-1.
17. *Ibid.*, 525.
18. Duhamel, *op.cit.*, 108; Pastoureau, *op.cit.*, 526-7.
19. Pastoureau, *op.cit.*, 534.
20. *Libération*, 19 June 1996. France had just come top of its group, hence the sexist word play.
21. Duhamel, *op.cit.*, 108.
22. France 98, *op.cit.*
23. CFO, *Footix: l'ambassadeur de France 98*, newsletter no.21, February 1997. Car manufacturer Vauxhall/Opel's experience in Spain with the Nova is salutary in the former respect: *no va* in Spanish means 'it does not go'; hardly the right marketing image to sell a car.
24. CFO, *Footix: l'ambassadeur de France 98*, newsletter no.21, February 1997.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Larousse, *Larousse multimédia encyclopédique*, CD ROM (Paris: Larousse/Liris Interactive, 1997).
27. *L'Événement du jeudi*, 22 September 1988.
28. *The Irish Times*, 28 November 1996.
29. BBC2, *World Cup Draw Live*, television broadcast, 4 December 1997.
30. S. Citron, *Le Mythe national: l'histoire de France en question* (Paris: Editions ouvrières/EDI, 1991), 43-7; 145-8; 159-60; 273-90.
31. Charles Martel: the leader of the Franks whose army defeated the invading Moors at Poitiers in 732.
32. Citron, *op.cit.*
33. M. Agulhon and P. Oulmont, *Nation, patrie, patriotisme* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1993), 1-2.
34. Citron, *op.cit.*
35. CFO, *La Mascotte de FRANCE 98 est née*, press release, 17 May 1996.